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The Merrimac and the Monitor

BY

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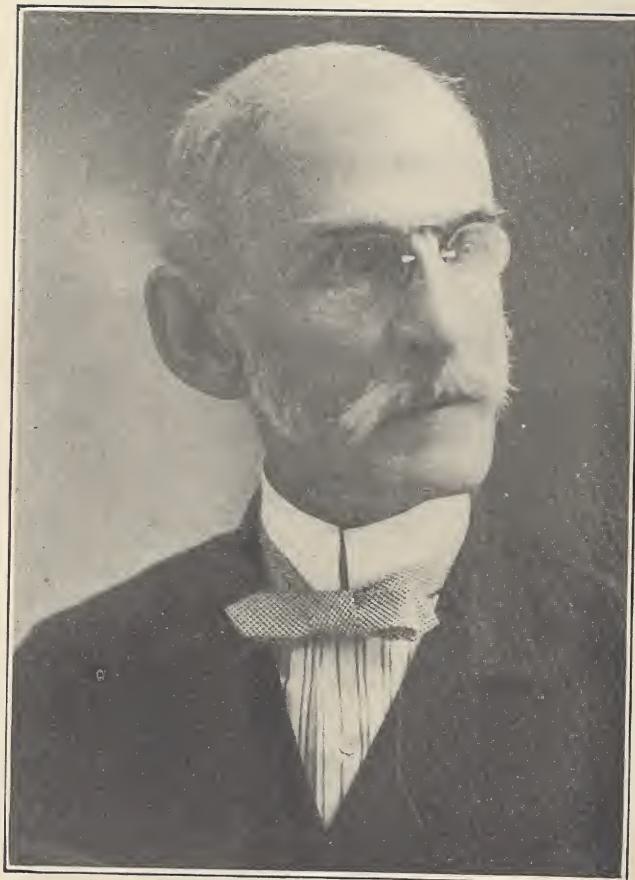
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MAJOR BENJAMIN SLOAN

THE MERRIMAC AND THE MONITOR

BY

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PREFACE

It is believed that the following account of the fight between the Merrimac and Monitor, written by Major Benjamin Sloan, an official eye-witness, should be of interest to the public. This bulletin is therefore issued as one of the contributions of the Extension Division of the University of South Carolina to the history of the South.

B. L. PARKINSON, *Director*
University Extension Division.

BENJAMIN SLOAN

Near the village of Pendleton, in Pendleton district, in 1836, Benjamin Sloan, officer of the United States army and later of the Confederate army, whose account of the career of the Confederate ironclad Merrimac and its combat with the Federal Monitor is presented in this bulletin, was born. He was the grandson of David McCurdy Sloan, an Irish immigrant who came and settled on Tugaloo river in South Carolina before the Revolution, and one of the 15 children of Thomas M. Sloan and his wife, who was a member of the well-known Blassingham family of Pendleton district.

Benjamin Sloan received his early education at the academy in Pendleton, then went to the Citadel in 1855 and after two years was appointed a cadet at West Point, where he was graduated in 1860, ranking seventh in the class. Altho entitled to assignment to the ordnance, Lieutenant Sloan, preferring more active service, obtained assignment as second lieutenant of the Second Dragoons then stationed in New Mexico. There, watching the Apaches and Comanches, part of the time at Albuquerque and part at Fort Defiance, he served until the spring of 1861, when news of the secession of South Carolina reached him. Resigning his commission, he set out for South Carolina, covering 800 miles of the distance on horseback, once nearly lost his life in a snow storm in the gorge of Sangre de Christo, and endured other hardships.

Arriving in South Carolina, his first Confederate service was to muster and drill the First Regiment of Rifles, organized by Judge James L. Orr, and subsequently commanded by Col. J. Foster Marshall. After serving as adjutant of the regiment he was ordered to the staff of Gen. Benjamin Huger at Norfolk, and it was then that he was a witness of the events described in this bulletin.

As Captain Sloan, he was placed in charge of the Tredegar iron works in Richmond, where he superin-

THE MERRIMAC AND THE MONITOR

It is feared that the day is passed when the true history of the affair between the Monitor and the Merrimac may be accepted. Nevertheless, I desire to put on record, not my impressions of the result, but what I saw and what I know. I write from memory, but while I live the mental picture of the naval fight in Hampton Roads on the 8th and 9th of March, 1862, will never fade.

Let me briefly recount. On the evacuation of Norfolk Navy Yard by the United States Government, a most unaccountable proceeding, the steam frigate Merrimac, together with other frigates, was scuttled and sunk. The Merrimac was set on fire and burned to her copper lines. Afterwards she was raised by the Confederates and, under the direction of Commander John M. Brooks, converted into an iron-clad ship purely for harbor defense, and a curious looking ship she was. In the water she looked to me more like a huge floating chicken coop than anything else. I shall not enter upon the details of her construction: Commander John M. Brooks, now at the Virginia Military Institute, is authority in that matter. The point that I wish to make here is, that in her reconstruction she was designed purely for harbor defense and with no thought of her going to sea. She was not only ungainly in exterior appearance, but she was in no way habitable for a sea voyage. She drew about twenty-two feet of water and the engine which drove her heavy mass was the same engine which drove the light wooden frigate Merrimac, an engine which it is known but poorly performed that task. I remember well, after the fight with the Monitor, escorting the Captain of the French Man-of-War who had come into the Roads for fresh water thru the ship. After spending some time below inspecting the guns and interior arrangements, we came back to her roof, or spar deck, if you please, when the Captain, drawing a long breath, exclaimed, "C'est un inferno," and so it was in appearance down below: we had emerged from

Note: This account was written by Major Sloan in 1907.

the darkness of Erebus, save for the flickering lights of a few dimly burning, smoking whale oil lamps. The Captain's mind was working seriously, and I fancied that he was coupling the infernal appearance below with the infernal destruction which that ship had wrought but a few days before.

Out of action, the only place aboard ship for the men was on top of her roof. She was simply a floating battery designed for harbor defense, and in this role she was invincible to the entire navy of the United States, as a true history of her short life will show. Her coming was the beginning of a new epoch in naval warfare. She was the progenitor of the magnificent iron or steel clads of today.

The conversion of the wooden frigate Merrimac into the ironclad Merrimac was done under immense difficulties. The men who did it had, as it were, "to saw a board with a gimlet and to bore a hole with a saw." The work was a long time under way, but at length, on the 7th of March, 1862, Major General Benjamin Huger, Commander of the Department of Norfolk, was informed that in spite of her incompleteness, the Merrimac proposed the next day to go down the Roads and try her fortune. So the General directed me, a member of his staff, on the morning of the 8th, to take the army tug boat, follow the Merrimac, and report results.

The Captain of the boat, its crew and I were its occupants, solely, as we steamed down the harbor in the wake of the Merrimac, which was accompanied by the gun boats, the Beaufort and the Raleigh; the squadron being under the command of Commodore Franklin Buchanan. After passing down Elizabeth River, the Merrimac headed up James River and was presently joined by the James River squadron of little gun boats, the Patrick Henry, the Jamestown, and the Teaser. No words of praise can be too strong in describing the gallant work of each of these little boats on that glorious day. The United States ships, the Congress and the Cumberland,

were lying off Newport News, and back of them, all in fancied security, were lying numerous smaller vessels lazily rocking in the swelling waters. It was wash day on board of ship, and evidently nothing was expected. About 2 p. m. the signal for "close action" was given and the Merrimac made for the Cumberland. As she approached closer and closer the jeers of the Jackies, "Come on, you damned old mud turtle," etc., could plainly be heard. The mud turtle kept on, fired her bow gun once and in a few minutes more rammed the Cumberland, which in about fifteen minutes more went to the bottom; but the Cumberland kept her guns going as long as she was above water, and went down with her flags flying.

Before the affair with the Cumberland was ended some of the little gun boats were busy with the Congress, which had run ashore. By this time all of the smaller craft which had been lying between the war ships and Newport News had hoisted sails and were scudding away to a safer haven. As for me, in my youthful exuberance of spirits, I was dancing a jig on the deck of the tug boat to a paraphrased rendition of the old negro refrain, which was made to run thus, "Such a getting up of sails I never did see." The Merrimac was sluggish in extricating herself from the Cumberland, and in turning, the water was too shallow for her great draught and her engine too weak, but eventually she ranged herself astern the Congress, and soon the white flag was flying from that ship. I saw two of our gun boats go alongside the Congress after the white flag went up, and I supposed that they had gone to receive the surrender of the ship and to remove the wounded (this supposition I learned afterwards was correct); but a terrific fire from both musketry and artillery was opened on the surrendered ship from the shore, so the boats withdrew and left the people of the Congress to their fate; she was burning and was blown up during the night. It was under this fire from the shore upon the surrendered ship that Commodore Buchanan, while standing upon the spar deck of the Mer-

rimac directing the measures taken to save the lives of the surviving members of the crew of the unfortunate ship, received a severe wound from a minnie ball, and Lieutenant Minor was also severely wounded while proceeding from the Merrimac to the Congress upon the merciful errand of saving the lives of his quondam foes.

While the fight was progressing three ships were seen approaching from Old Point Comfort. One of them got near enough to have a taste of the fight and then ran ashore (it was the Minnesota), the other two—the Roanoke and the St. Laurence—made their way as best they could back to Old Point. It seemed to me that a great mistake was made in not destroying the Minnesota that afternoon, but I suppose it was confidently expected that this would be an easy job for the next morning. At any rate, as the evening closed in, the Confederate squadron withdrew and anchored off Sewell's Point for the night. During the night, Commander Buchanan and the wounded men of the squadron were removed to hospitals ashore; Captain Catesby Jones was left in command of the Merrimac.

Early next morning, under orders, I again went aboard the little tug boat and went down the river to see and report whatever might happen. We had not proceeded far beyond Lamberts Point on the way toward the stranded Minnesota, when I saw a strange looking craft which looked to me more like a big cheese box on a big shingle than anything else: It was the United States iron-clad, the Monitor. Soon the two novel iron-clad vessels were engaged. The Merrimac was drawing about 22 feet of water, and with her great mass and weak engine, moved sluggishly; the Monitor was far lighter, and I have since learned, drew only about ten feet.

No one of the wooden vessels took part in the action; and so busy were the two participants with each other no notice of outsiders was taken by either one of them, so we drew up quite close to the combatants. Around and around the ships circled like two game cocks engaged in

mortal combat, each seeking for a vulnerable point. Once the Merrimac rammed the Monitor, but apparently without effect. The fight lasted for several hours, many of the shots being delivered when the ships were only a few yards apart. It appears that neither ship was provided with solid shot, both of them using shells. Otherwise the result might have been very different, for neither one was apparently damaged. The Monitor was not hurt bodily, but her spirits seem to have received a shock early in the fight. I learned afterwards that her Commander, Worden, had been knocked out quite early by the impact of one of the Merrimac's shells against the walls of the Monitor's turret. The Merrimac certainly was not damaged and not a man on board of her was even wounded.

At noon, or thereabouts, the Monitor seems to have had enough, and drew off into the shoal water entirely out of harmful reach of the Merrimac's shells, and in that shoal water she steadfastly remained. The Merrimac, because of her great draught, simply could not get at the Monitor, so after waiting for some time for her to return, and seeing no signs of her willingness to do so, the Merrimac headed towards Sewell's Point, for the tide was falling. Immediately afterwards the Monitor steamed straight for the shelter of the guns of Old Point, and under that shelter she persistently remained during the remainder of the short lifetime of the Merrimac. She never could be induced to renew the fight. After loitering some time in the vicinity of the late duel, the Merrimac returned to Norfolk. On that 9th day of March, 1862, the Monitor was a whipped ship.

The Merrimac went back to Norfolk to have herself properly settled again in the water. Two days' consumption of coal and water and the loss of her anchor and cast iron prow (this prow had been broken off and left in the Cumberland when she was rammed), had lightened her to such an extent that her shield was dangerously near being lifted out of the water.

So far, with her game little attendants, the Merrimac

had destroyed two ships, stranded and crippled a third, killed and wounded upwards of 400 of the enemy's men, with a loss, all told, for herself and attendants, not exceeding 60 men; whipped the Monitor; literally cleared the harbor of every floating bit of wood or iron which bore the flag of the United States; spread consternation thruout the entire North, and amazed the civilized world: She had inaugurated a new order of naval warfare.

So peaceful and quiet was Norfolk harbor after these stirring events that the Merrimac was docked to have her prow restored and for the purpose of completing some of her unfinished work. In the meantime, Commodore Buchanan still suffering from his wound, Commodore Tattnall was assigned to the command of the Merrimac and her attendants. On the 11th day of April, under his command, the squadron went down the Roads to stir up a fight. The steamer Vanderbilt, specially designed to ram the Merrimac, had arrived below Old Point and so, too, had another iron-clad vessel, the Naugatuck. The Monitor was there also, as well as several United States frigates. The Confederate squadron literally "took possession of the Roads;" cut out three vessels from under the enemy's guns and tauntingly steamed up and down in front of the United States ships, including the Monitor, inviting them to come out from the shelter of the guns of Old Point, but in spite of the pressing invitation of the Commodore, no one of them, not even the Monitor, could be induced to venture out. About sunset Commodore Tattnall, in supreme disgust, ordered a gun to be fired seawards, and making the Indian sign of contempt to the enemy's ships, steamed back to Norfolk. From that time so long as she floated, like "Andrew Barton," the Merrimac remained "King of the Seas."

Early in May, 1862, it was determined in Richmond that the Peninsula, as well as Norfolk, should be abandoned. Spies,—and unfortunately there were many of this kind of cattle in Richmond and Norfolk,—conveyed this information to Old Point Comfort, so on the 8th day

of May, thinking that the Confederates were at their mercy, Blanche, Tray, and Sweetheart, of the United States Navy, including the Monitor, steamed up to Sewell's Point and began to bombard it. The Merrimac was at the navy yard, and upon hearing the guns she proceeded to the scene of action. Her appearance acted as a sudden flood of light in a dark room infested with vermin: The individual members of the attacking squadron vied with each other in swiftly seeking cover. They all, with one accord, scurried back to Old Point. It was a sight to be remembered. Remember, it was the ship Merrimac, which, according to history as taught in most of the schools, had been so signally beaten by the Monitor on the 9th day of March, 1862, that produced this ignominious flight of the conquering squadron.

On the 10th day of May, Norfolk was evacuated. This ended the career of the Merrimac. She had been constructed for the defense of Norfolk harbor, and had proudly and completely fulfilled her destiny. She could not go to sea, for she was not seaworthy; nor could she ascend the James River, for her draught was too great. There was no alternative left Commodore Tattnall; he set fire to the ship and she was blown up. Then it suddenly dawned upon the Northern makers of history that the Merrimac was beaten and that the Monitor had done it. Save us from such history.

The Monitor herself foundered and perished shortly afterwards in her effort to go from Norfolk to Beaufort, North Carolina.

NOTE: I have endeavored in this paper, briefly and comprehensively, to give a sketch of the career of the Merrimac during the spring months of 1862, and have therefore purposely refrained from entering minutely into details. The facts given are recorded from my own observation, and it has pleased me greatly to find the truth of this record so fully corroborated by statements published, independently, during the summer just passed, by three Confederates, each of whom was an eye-witness to the transaction he has recorded. These statements were kindly sent to me by Professor Chas. W. Bain. A duplicate copy of Major H. Ashton Ramsay's statement, published in the

Baltimore Sun, was also sent me by Professor G. A. Wauchope. Major Ramsey was the chief engineer of the Merrimac and his testimony is unimpeachable. He makes the departure of the Monitor for Old Point precede that of the Merrimac for the bar at the mouth of the river. As he had charge of the engine of the Merrimac, I admit he is the better authority.

Mr. Douglas C. Cannon, whose statement was published in the Norfolk Landmark, was a Lieutenant of the Signal Corps, C. S. A., and saw the fight between the two ships on March 9th, 1862, from the top of the signal tower on Craney Island, from which point he could, with his field glasses, see distinctly everything that transpired in any part of the harbor, or Roads. He agrees with Major Ramsay as to the relative time of departure of the two ships from the scene of action. Certain it is that the Monitor was sheltered under the guns at Fort Monroe and vicinity while yet the Merrimac was in the Roads.

Mr. F. G. Fiveash, also a citizen of Norfolk, in a communication to the Norfolk Landmark, July 17, 1906, gives his testimony as to the dispersion of the U. S. Fleet from Sewell's Point on May 8th, which confirms the truth of Major Ramsay's statement and mine. In a subsequent paper, also published in the Norfolk Landmark, he gives a full sketch of the career of the Merrimac during her short life, and adds to his sketch much interesting matter gathered from the records of both navies.

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